

The Way of Goodness (Re-Envisioned)

Psalm 73

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Good morning, CPC. Now, this is my third time preaching, so I'm going to let you know now I might get a little familiar with you. At this time, I invite you to open your Bibles to Psalm 73. Listen as I read God's word.

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.

Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.

Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your wonderful works. [ESV]

I added "wonderful." "All your works." This is the word of the Lord. This is a message that I have entitled *The Way of Goodness (Re-Envisioned)*. In the opening message in this series, Pastor Randy mentioned the discomfort you find in the Psalms. That warning or encouragement may have initially had a strange ring to it, for as you think about devotional time spent in Psalm 23, you find nothing but comfort there. You may think, well, where is the discomfort in the biblical imagery that depicts God as our shepherd? What is troubling about the most high stooping low to lead and restore and protect and comfort? Or, perhaps in times that you've spent in Christian novelty stores, you've also been challenged by this notion of discomfort in the Psalms. When you think of the artwork associated with the Psalms, it is usually warm and lush depictions of what John Bunyan would describe as by-path meadows. That is to say, images of an easy path, a way of goodness.

Well, as you enter into Psalm 73, it does not come to you with the beautiful soft colors of a Hobby Lobby picture. Instead it greets you with discomfoting honesty and transparency. It brings you to a point of being at the end of yourself in like the same way that we find Asaph at the end of himself. Asaph, he was one of the worship leaders responsible for composing music and leading choirs. When I studied this and read it, I thought, man, that creates an image in my mind of John Song. So, while you may be thinking of Asaph, some of you are probably envisioning John Song now. I'm sorry about that, John.

But as we look at this imagery of Asaph, we find something that we don't expect to see in a Levitical priest. We expect to find in a Levitical priest someone who's living the victorious covenant life up on the mountain tops occasionally swooping down to encourage us in the valleys. But Asaph finds himself, instead, in a place that's very familiar to many of us. It's a place that we would describe as a place of crisis. It's a place that Pastor Randy described as that place of discomfort.

I had a brother come and encourage me a bit about the sermon and almost offered a word of consolation because the studies in the Psalms that preceded this one all had something of a happy ring to it. Psalm 1 speaks of happiness. "Blessed is the man that walks not in the council of the ungodly." And we follow that with Psalms of praise as Pastor P.D. walked us into reasons to praise God, peering into His creative work, His creative power, His character, His redemptive work. And even as Pastor John Song was walking us through an introduction into wisdom, the wisdom songs, they still greeted us with something to warm our hearts.

But here and now as we come up to Psalm 73, we see one who is losing his traction, so to speak, in the Christian walk. And we read this, and we think, why even write this Psalm? Why even include this walk through discouragement and discomfort in the scriptures? In the language of Romans 15:5, this Psalm was written for our learning, that through the patience and comfort of the scriptures, we might have hope. As discomfoting and disturbing as this Psalm may initially seem, it comes to us to give us hope because for many of us, including myself, we live in this place that Asaph is describing. And we need this measure of wisdom. This Psalm comes to us like the title of Francis Schaeffer's classic book addressing itself to the question of *How Should We Then Live?*

In light of the fact of having this reform, this robust reform theology, in light of the fact that we have these presuppositions that undergird us and provide us with an anchor for our souls, we live in this world that is topsy turvy. We live in this world where things are happening in a way that challenges our faith. And so, we find ourselves like Asaph, losing sight of the way of goodness.

And Asaph demonstrates that in uncomfortable press between faith and life, we see Asaph attempting to reconcile what he knew to be true about God in light of what he was seeing in life. And as he was attempting to reconcile that truth, he was grappling with the theme of goodness. That seems to be the over-arching thing that he's concerned about, the way of goodness, the good life. How do I land on that conclusion? Well, we look at the first verse of the Psalm, we look at the last verse of the Psalm, and we see a repetitive theme there. It's a literary device called an inclusio. He repeats the word "good" so as to show that all that he is discussing within the heart of the Psalm couched between those two verses is about goodness, the way of goodness.

He begins by saying, "Truly, God is good." And in that, he shares with us his theological position. But it's not only his theological position. It's the conclusion that he's reached because as he's lived this, he's found that sometimes the work of grace, the operative work of grace in your life, comes without anesthetic. God works on you in a way that you can feel it.

And so, as Asaph is saying, "Truly, God is good," it was very likely a time – using a contemporary Christian cliché – where he may have heard the words, "God is good all the time, and all the time, God is good," and he thought, but is He? Is He though? I hear what you're saying about God being good all the time, and all the time, God is good. But when I enter into this comparative analysis, when I look at my life and the life of those who are described as being the pure in heart – Psalm 24:4 describes the pure in heart as those who have not given themselves over to an idol – as I look at this comparison, I see that the

wicked are prosperous. I see that they have no problems in life. And I'm questioning this whole concept and this notion of God being good. I'm one of the covenant kids. But when I look at my life in light of their life, the side by side comparison is not flattering. It seems like it's more profitable to be as they are. God is good all the time, and all the time, God is good.

We see that Asaph's worship worldview and his walk were adversely impacted by what he was looking at. At some point, he had turned his eyes away from the covenant-keeping God and started to look at life, look at the world, look at the culture, and look at those who are profiting, and it's causing his feet to slip. He could feel himself giving way. He could feel himself in sinking sand because his notion of goodness was dictated by sight or material things. He could see the wicked prospering, living a life of ease, and even flaunting it. He goes so far as to say that they are wearing their prosperity and their pride as a necklace. And you can't even talk to them. He says you can't even talk to them because while they have their pride as a necklace, their violence covers them as a garment. In other words, if you say something to them, you end up catching hands.

Their hearts were overflowing with follies. They scoff and they speak with malice. Loftily, they threaten oppression. And Lord, you're not saying anything. Lord, you're not doing anything. And this is more than a small problem. I'm not the only one that falls in this category, God. You see where he says that in verse 10? "Therefore, his people," that is to say God's people, "turn back to them." That is to say that the covenant people of God seem to be so fixated on these people who are the wicked and the arrogant that they keep turning back to them.

Then you look at the phrase that follows it, and it doesn't really help you understand what's being communicated here. It says, "Therefore, his people turn back to them and find no fault in them." Literally, it's rendered, the waters of a full cup are drained by them. That's not helpful either, is it? It's giving you the picture of their cup foaming with fullness, overflowing with plenty. It's rehearsing into our hearts this idea of fatness and sleekness and bounty that they were enjoying. He says, God, it's not just me that's envying them. It's affecting your covenant kids because they're not finding fault in them and they see them enjoying plenty. And even as they scoff and they blaspheme against you, it seems that their blasphemy has no limits.

Asaph was struggling. And initially, we find no instructive comfort or guidance in this first grouping of words. But Asaph actually gives it to us at the very outset. At the very outset, he says, "Truly God is good," "But as for me." He makes a clear distinction between the transcendent God of goodness and this creaturely individual that he is.

To me, as I look at that, it brings to mind Isaiah 55:8-9. I know since I've been in Isaiah for several years, everything brings to mind Isaiah. But follow me here. Isaiah 55:8-9, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." The passage is coming to us telling us that in our times of perplexity, while it seems like God is asleep at the wheel, it's just that His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. The God who governs it all is still in control.

It's a difficult lesson to learn. And Asaph is stepping us through his process of getting there, but he hasn't reached that point yet. For as he enters into the next grouping of verses, verses 13-17 where we see him gaining insight into the way of goodness, we're again reminded of this pathway that Asaph has taken, this pathway of sanctifying grace that he would feel, this pathway that had the divine potter putting him on the wheel and molding him and making him again into another vessel.

It brings to mind a song that we used to sing at the old church where I used to go to where it went something like this. "Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me." Those words are both beautiful and melodic. However, what you miss is that when you really think about it, they are extremely painful because the song comes forth as almost like a sanctifying prayer. Lord, pour out your sanctifying heat on me and melt me. Take me up in your

hands and crush me in areas where I must be crushed and mold me. Someone's saying, I'm not going to sing that song anymore. Press me, shape me, contour me, and form me into a vessel for your use.

And this is where the Lord was taking Asaph. And this is where the Lord takes you. You know the mornings that I'm going to make mention of, the mornings where it is extremely hard to get out of bed, the mornings where the thought of coming to corporate worship is a task that you're not interested in undertaking because you can't take another smiling face. You can't take another platitude which you at that time feel like is fake. You don't want to hear the singing. There's nothing to sing about. You don't want to hear the prayer. You keep hearing that prayer changes things, but there you are. There you are. But the Lord in His sanctifying grace is looking to do something marvelous in your life. He's looking to mold you in the way that He's molding Asaph.

But even before Asaph gets to that point, frustration just overtakes him. He says, Lord, as I look at the wicked, I mean truly, I have given myself to the secondary means of grace all in vein. It's been for nothing. Coming to vacation Bible school, it's for nothing. Coming to these studies and these worship services, and it's for nothing. Nothing's changing.

But then the passage says that he goes into the sanctuary of God. In the Hebrew, the word there rendered "sanctuary of God" is actually plural. Then he went into the sanctuaries of God. There are some commentators that say, well, that's actually communicating that he entered into the mysteries of God. I was like, wow, what does that mean? It's very likely not what's being said there. John Calvin, as he looked at it, he says that "He's entering in and he's hearing the celestial doctrine." That is to say that the word of God is being opened up and expounded and articulated into his hearing. It's being communicated to him in a way that impacts and nurtures his soul. That could be it.

It could be that as it is communicating this idea of plurality, the sanctuaries of God, it could be the plural of amplification or intensification. That is to say that as he entered into the sanctuaries of God, there was something marvelous that the Lord was doing in everything that he could see. Entering the various temple gates, he could think about the fact that he had access to the most high God. As he saw the accoutrements of worship, he could think about the fact that God had given a certain provision for him to draw near. It was ministering to him.

I'm sure for some of you, you've had a testimony where you've said, I wasn't going to come. But as I entered into the vestibule and I was greeted by the first person, they said just the thing I needed to hear. Or maybe as the liturgist was ruminating on devotional thoughts that they had in preparation, the way that they were sharing the word of God and their reflections on it met you at your point of need. Or maybe as you heard the songs being sung and played, it didn't come to you as just the beauty of artistry. It spoke to you. And from the point that it spoke to you, you could now see clearly. You could now see things in their proper context. God was giving you the big picture.

And that's where we find Asaph, entering the sanctuaries of God. That is entering the schoolhouse of God and being able to discern the end of the wicked. In this picture of the sanctuary and all of these temple images we find throughout the Psalms are merely signpost illusions. They're pointing to the substance that we find in Christ, the fulfillment. Hebrews 10:19-23 comes to mind.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest, over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. [ESV]

It reminds us of God's faithfulness, that even in the midst of slippery places, He's faithful. Even when you go through this comparative analysis after you enter into the sanctuaries of God, you find out, He's faithful.

And so, with that thought of the faithfulness of God and seeing the end of the wicked, Asaph comes to a place of re-envisioning the way of goodness. No longer was it framed in material concepts. As a result of this spiritual interaction that he has with the Lord between verses 13 through 17, it moves him to see the way of goodness in a relational light. The faith of this Levitical priest has been recalibrated. No longer is he envying the wicked because he finds them falling into ruin. He finds them being actually in slippery places, and that their prosperity is like the dream. It's here today. It's gone in a moment. It's transitory in comparison. He says, Lord, when you rouse yourself, you make all of their fake platitudes disappear. And it brings him to a place of repentance. And that's what you find in verses 21 and 22.

But then, as you trace down to verses 23, 24, and 25, and 26, this is Asaph redefining, reorienting himself to what it means to be in the way of goodness. He says, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you." This wasn't Asaph saying, I got the hold to His hand, God's unchanging hands, as if it was by his strength that he was holding on to God. He says, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you" because "you hold my right hand." "You hold my right hand." In fact, the word there for "hold" is the same word that we find in Genesis 22:13 where it speaks about the ram in the thicket being caught, seized, unable to free himself. Asaph is saying, Lord, you have grabbed hold of me. I am continually with you. You hold me by my right hand. When things are slippery, you hold me. You hold me. When things are confusing, you guide me. And ultimately, you will receive me into your glory.

And that's when he crescendos in his worship. He's reflected on the character of God. He's reflected on the redemptive work of God, the creative power of God in some sense. And he says, "Whom have I in heaven but you?" It's his ways of going back to the Levitical priesthood and saying, I understand that when you were apportioning out inheritances for all those other tribes, you told the Levites, don't worry about that; I am your portion. And so, with that in mind, Asaph says, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail." I might be at slippery places, but you, O Lord, are "the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

The wicked are those who are described as being those who are far off, those who perish. And so, Asaph is able to come back and say, I understand the way of goodness now. The way of goodness is not necessarily prosperity. The way of goodness as we find captured here in verse 28 is to be near God and to have Him as your refuge. In those dark and painful times, while it may not seem like it, while it may not feel like it, God is holding onto you and He will not let you go.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the comfort that we find in your word. Thank you for this process that Asaph went through and immortalized in your scripture-written revelation so that we may be built up, so that we might be comforted, so we might be reoriented, so that we might re-envision the way of goodness. Seal this word to our hearts. This I ask in Jesus's name. Amen.